

Primrose.

I.

"Si je pouvais trouver un trésor,
 Dans un vieux pot des pièces d'or
 À Sainte-Anne d'Auray
 J'irais pieds nus sur la route. . . ."

ANDRÉ DUPLESSIS hums snatches of the old Breton song as he sits under the chestnut-trees in the Luxembourg Gardens. It is Sunday afternoon; a bright April afternoon ten years ago. The birds are twittering volubly among the young leaves above his head, the Medici Fountain hard by splashes and sparkles in the sunshine. Merry troops of children run races down the shady *allées*, old pensioners trot sedately, arm-in-arm, along the sunny terraces, *ouvriers* and their white-capped wives or sweethearts loiter on the green slopes. Everything and every one has a look of spring-time and holiday.

"Si j' pouvais trouver un trésor" the young man repeats, as he pencils the outline of a chestnut-bough in his pocket sketch-book.

André is looking for a treasure: not gold pieces in a pot, however, but an even rarer *trouvaille*—fame. It was in the hope of finding it that he left his dull little Breton town a year ago, and instead of settling down decorously to the notary's desk, like his father and grandfather before him, came up to Paris with a light heart, and a pocket to match, and a head full of dreams, hopes, illusions. Many of the dreams have vanished, some of the illusions have been rudely dispelled, but the hopes remain, bright, though distant, tinging his path with "the light that never was on sea or land."

"That is a funny song. What is it called?" asks a voice, so close to his ear that he starts.

The bench is a double one, with seats facing both ways, and the speaker leans over the back to address him. He turns sharply, reddening and frowning a little, but the frown dies a sudden death in the light of a pair of the sweetest blue eyes that ever turned a lad's head at a first glance. They belong to a girl of eighteen, dressed with the dainty neatness of a Parisian *ouvrière*, in black alpaca, relieved by spotless linen collar and cuffs, her only ornament a little bunch of primroses at her breast. Like most of her class, she is pale, but

"with that paleness o' the pearl that's fit in a fair woman"; her head has no covering but its profuse bronze-brown hair, growing low on the temples, and waving to the roots.

"What is the name of it?" she repeats, as he stares at her without replying.

"Mademoiselle," he stammers, taking off his hat, "it has no name that I know of. It is a foolish old song we sing in my country—le Morbihan. My nurse taught it me."

"Ah, you are Breton?" She looks him over with the fearless curiosity of a child. "What are you? What profession?"

"I am an artist."

"*Artiste-peintre*?" she purses her lips disparagingly; "one of *ces messieurs* who wear funny hats and velvet coats, and never get their hair cut or pay their debts—? Bah! why did you choose to be a painter?"

He laughs.

"Because I could not help it. I did not choose Art, she chose me; and when she calls to you, go you must."

His companion lifts her pretty shoulders with a gesture of non-comprehension.

"Say the words of that song again, will you? I like it."

"Dans un vieux pot des pièces d'or" . . . she repeats when he has finished; "I wish I could find some."

"Why? Are you not rich enough already? Youth and beauty and innocence are——"

He stops there rather lamely, for after looking at him a moment, with raised eyebrows, she laughs with the frankest amusement.

"*Tiens!* How drolly you talk; just as they do at the theatre. One can see you are provincial."

He colours and bites his lip.

"I ought to have lost some of my rustic simplicity by this time," he says after a moment, recovering his temper with an effort. "For I have lived in Paris more than a year. And you, mademoiselle?"

"I am Parisienne born. Shall I tell you my history?"

She clasps her hands over the back of the bench, and lays her dimpled chin upon them:

"My mother was a *blanchisseuse*, at one of the great *lavoirs* down by the river. She was a very passionate woman, and she drank; and when she had been drinking, instead of beating the linen, she beat me. When I was big enough I ran away; I was brought back and beaten worse than ever. When I was a little older I ran away again, and again I was brought back and punished. Rather monotonous, wasn't it? I should have run away once more, and for good this time, for I had made up my mind to jump into the river rather than be caught,

but a woman, an acquaintance of my mother's, offered to take me and teach me her trade."

"That was kind."

"Yes, was it not?" she answers, ever so drily. "She bought me of my mother for fifty francs and a silk dress. She did not beat me or starve me, but she made me work till my limbs ached, and my head was stupid, and my heart sick; and if I had stayed with her she would have—*n'importe*; I did not stay. I bore it till I was fifteen, and could earn my own living, then I left her. After that——"

"After that?" he repeats, as she pauses.

She is gazing straight before her, and a curious darkening look, like sudden twilight, has fallen on her bright face. But he has hardly noticed it when it passes like a breath from a mirror, and she looks at him again.

"Why, after that I was my own mistress, and worked for myself. *Voilà tout*."

"And what is your work?" he ventures to ask. "You are not a sempstress."

"How do you know that?"

He lightly touches the first finger of her left hand, which bears no traces of the needle. She laughs.

"You have quick eyes. But the sewing-machine leaves no mark, Monsieur le Peintre. *Tiens*," she adds suddenly, "there is a woman selling *gaufres*: I wish I had some."

In a moment he has darted after the woman, and returns laughing and breathless, with both hands full of cakes.

"I bought all her stock, and she called me 'mon prince.' Put the rest in your pocket."

She nods. Her little white teeth are already busy, nibbling the crisp cakes.

"I have not tasted any for years. How good they are!" she says presently. "It is pleasant here, *n'est-ce pas*? Hark at the fountain! Doesn't it seem to be trying to say something?"

"Do you often come here?"

She shakes her head.

"No. I don't know why I came to-day. It was a fancy, a caprice, what you will."

There is a pause.

"Do you think you will have another such caprice next Sunday? Because——"

She shakes her head again as she brushes the crumbs from her dress.

"It is too far. I live right at the other side of Paris—Quartier Montmartre. And besides——"

He waits for the rest of the sentence, but she is so busy cramming the cakes into her pocket that apparently she forgets to finish it.

"Well, whether you come or not I shall be here, at the same place, at the same hour. You are not going, so soon? May I walk with you?"

"No!" with a look that shows she means it. "And you must not follow me. Promise."

He promises meekly.

"At least you will tell me your name?" he pleads. "Mine is André Duplessis, and I live in the Rue Madame."

"What does my name matter? Call me what you will."

"Then as it was spring when I met you, and you wore primroses in your dress, I shall call you 'Mam'selle Primevère.'"

"That is a prettier name than my own," she says, and with a little nod and a wave of the hand she walks away down the long green avenue, through alternate gleams of sunshine and shade.

Many a time, in years to come, he sees her so in dreams, walking away from him through sun and shadow.

He keeps his promise loyally, and does not follow her. But there is no prohibition against his thinking of her; and he thinks of little else all the week, making innumerable sketches of her in every possible and many impossible attitudes, and always tearing them up impatiently, as soon as finished. There is something in the girl's face that eludes his pencil.

The following Sunday is a typical April day, of alternate gleams and showers. Early in the afternoon he is at his old post under the chestnut-trees, but "Mam'selle Primevère" comes not. After waiting for a couple of hours, he gives her up, and wanders about the gardens disconsolately, taking a dismal pleasure in getting wet. At length a fiercer shower than usual drives him to take refuge in the palace, which is thronged with Sunday sight-seers. He makes his way to the gallery of modern paintings, and who should be sitting on a bench at the end but "Miss Primrose."

Her head hangs a little aside with a look of weariness, her blue eyes are directed absently towards the painting opposite—Rosa Bonheur's sunny picture of 'Nivernais Husbandry.'

She is paler than usual, and her face has that darkened look he has noticed before. When she sees him, a flash, a gleam of something like pleasure, crosses it. The expression passes in an instant, but it has been there, and his heart thrills with a momentary exultation.

"So you came, after all!" he exclaims triumphantly.

"I came to see the pictures," she answers coldly, and André feels extinguished.

"I have been wandering about in the gardens, till I am as wet

as a water-kelpie," he says, laughing as he shows his dripping sleeve.

"I told you I should not come."

"Yes, but somehow I could not help hoping that you would change your mind. Have you been here long, 'Primrose'?"

"Long enough to get tired and hungry," she answers, yawning.

André comes out with a bold proposal.

"Suppose we go somewhere and have dinner?"

She stops in the middle of a yawn, and looks at him with raised eyebrows.

"*Par exemple!* you are improving."

"I shall, no doubt, if I have the benefit of your society. Do come!"

"What time is it?" she asks.

"Nearly five."

She knits her brows, making some mental calculation, then her face clears, a smile ripples over it as she looks up at him.

"*Allons donc!*" she says, rising, and gives him her hand like a child.

He draws the little hand through his arm, and they pass through the gallery, and run down the grand staircase into the Rue du Tournou.

He takes her to a restaurant in the Rue Vaugirard, much frequented by the brethren of the brush, who have decorated the bare walls of the *salle* with sketches and caricatures innumerable.

She has quite recovered her spirits now, and chatters merrily, "like a brook when sun and wind together please it," treating her companion with a frank little air of *bon camaraderie*, as if they were a couple of schoolboys playing truant. Her piquant manner, with its capricious changes, her bright bewildering blue eyes and sweet flitting smile, make her simply irresistible—at least to André, who was seriously smitten when they sat down to table, and is hopelessly in love before they rise.

After much entreaty, she consents to accept his escort part of the way home. It is raining again when they sally forth, and as she will not hear of a *fiacre*, he borrows an umbrella; a villainous umbrella of dingy green, with a broken wire, but it is an enchanted tent to him, for it shelters "her," and she is obliged to keep close to his side, or there would not be room for both. The soft spring dusk has fallen, and the wet Boulevards are glittering with gas; the cafés are crowded, the theatres are opening, *voitures de place* are rattling over the stones; the *post-prandial* round of amusement has commenced.

They cross the river by the Pont des Arts, and having traversed

the Rue de Rivoli and the Avenue Napoleon, turn from the Boulevard des Capucines into the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. When they reach the church of La Trinité, his companion pauses, and puts out her hand.

"Adieu!"

"Not adieu, that is a miserable word. You will meet me again?" he asks eagerly.

She shakes her head as she gathers up the skirt of her dress.

"No, I am afraid."

"Of what?" he asks as she pauses. "Not of me, surely?"

She looks straight into his honest dark eyes. They are standing under a lamp by the balustrade which incloses the square in front of the church.

"No, not of you. You are kind, and I think you are true."

"If you think so," he begins, "why——"

But already she is turning from him.

"Adieu!" she repeats, and without another word she walks away.

"Stop!" he exclaims, "you must take the umbrella, it is raining. You will not? *Bien*; I shall come with you to carry it."

"Give it me then," she says pettishly, "and now go home, do you hear?"

But André does not go home. He stands under the lamp till she has moved away, then follows her at a discreet distance.

He has to walk quickly to keep up with her, as she hurries on, daintily picking her way over the wet pavement. Just as she turns into the Rue Blanche, the broken wire of the dilapidated umbrella comes into contact with the hat of a gentleman who is advancing in an opposite direction.

As she murmurs an apology, he bends and peers into her face, takes another look, then, with something that sounds like an exclamation of surprise, stops short. André sees her shrink away, and sees the man turn as if to follow her; the next moment he is at her side, has drawn her hand through his arm, and with one movement of his shoulders hustles the gay Lothario into the gutter.

"*Que diable!*" mutters the latter, not ill-temperedly, however, picking up his hat, which has fallen into a puddle. He gives them both a keen glance, then with a shrug and a half-laugh takes himself off.

Primrose clings to the young artist's arm. She is trembling excessively, and seems more scared than the occasion warrants.

"Is he gone?" she asks, glancing over her shoulder.

"*Parbleu!*" returns her companion grimly; "you are safe now, *chère amie*, I am here to protect you."

She draws a breath of relief, and begins to recover herself.

"You were following me." Those are her first words as she withdraws her hand from his arm.

"I was," he answers doggedly, "and I intend to follow you, to protect you from insult, as I would a sister if I had one. It is no use arguing," he adds. "I am Breton born; that is to say, I am as obstinate as a pig, or a mule, or a woman."

She looks at him frowningly, then her face softens in spite of her.

"Let us turn back a moment," she says.

They walk slowly along the broad terrace which lies between the church and the square. The rain has ceased suddenly, and a watery moon is climbing through dark banks of cloud. Midway on the terrace Primrose pauses, with one hand on the balustrade, looking down into the square gardens, where the wet leaves glisten in the moonlight, and the brimming basins of the fountains are touched with a tremulous lustre. The moist earth sends up a sweet fresh smell, the air breathes cool in their faces like a breeze from "the innocent plains of Paradise." The murmur and stir of Paris is all around and about them, but this spot is an oasis of silence and solitude.

"Why should you take so much trouble about me?" says the girl at last, in a subdued voice. "I am not your sister; I am nothing to you—or any one."

There is something forlorn in her tone that goes straight to his heart, and strikes a chord of tender pity. In a sudden impulse—one of those blind impulses which hurry men into deeds of madness and heroism—he takes her hand, and whispers:

"You are something to me; you may be everything if you will. I love you."

She looks at him a moment incredulously, then snatches her hand away.

"How dare you!" she pants—"how dare you insult me! *You*, too, whom I fancied——"

Her voice breaks suddenly.

"*Mon amie*, you do not understand," says André gently. "The love I offer you is not an insult. I want you to be my wife."

"Your wife! Are you mocking me?" She looks into his face. "No, you are actually in earnest. Your wife!" She pauses a moment, then bursts into a ringing laugh, which jars upon him somehow.

"*A la bonne heure*, Monsieur André! Is that courtship *à la mode de Bretagne*? Why, you have only seen me twice; you do not even know my name!"

"I shall know it soon, I hope. You have told me your history already—such a piteous little story! Dear, my heart went out to

you from the moment when your sweet eyes first met mine. If I had known you years I could not love you better than I do. We are both alone in the world—we might be so happy together!

“ . . . dans notre humble et petit ménage,
Tout, même l'hiver, serait printemps. . . . ”

We should be poor, but what is poverty when one is young and hopeful and loving? And sooner or later I shall win fame and success, I know. *Dites-moi*, why should you refuse me?”

He takes the hand that hangs at her side and bends to look into her face.

“ Primrose——?”

The pressure of his fingers sends a swift blush to the roots of her hair. An indescribable look crosses her face. It is not joy, or shame, or fear, or wonder, yet all those emotions are expressed in it.

Suddenly she pushes his hand away with a hasty passionate movement. “No, no—it is impossible. Don't tempt me!”

She turns from him abruptly, and walks away towards the Rue de Londres. In a moment he is at her side.

“Then it does tempt you?” he exclaims, with a smile of hope and triumph. “After that admission I will never leave you till you consent. I don't ask you to marry me immediately, only give me the opportunity of winning your heart. Let us meet for a time as we have to-day, and——”

“Would that content you?” she asks, stopping suddenly. “And suppose—suppose I have a fancy not to tell you my name just at present, or anything more than you know already, will you promise not to follow me, or watch me, or question me?”

His face clouds, and for a moment he hesitates.

“I would rather you trusted me, but—well, I agree. But you will not keep me long in the dark? When will you tell me?”

She looks down at her foot, idly tracing a pattern on the gravel.

“I will tell you—in three weeks,” she says slowly; “on the first of May.”

He glances round; the terrace is quite deserted.

“Seal the compact, sweet one,” he whispers, bending his face to hers.

She looks at him a moment doubtfully, wistfully, and her eyes are troubled. Then she bends forward and kisses his dark cheek. He kisses hers, and so, for good or ill, the compact is made.

II.

APRIL, with its short-lived smiles and soon-dried tears, has worn itself away. It is a golden, radiant, cloudless day—May's first-born. The warm wind blows from "the gates of the sun," the blue sky is as tranquil as an infant's eyes.

On this bright Sunday, Paris is turned inside out. Not a creature remains in town who can by any possibility get into the country. On foot, in carriages, by rail, by river, all Paris rushes out of its shell, eager to breathe the sweetness of the woods and fields.

The very river seems in a hurry to escape, as it goes swirling under the bridges and past the dusty quays; but when it has left the city behind, it loiters like the laziest of rivers, winding and meandering, and now and then widening out into a sleepy pool, as if it had resolved to go no farther to-day.

Its waters are not yet troubled by the busy "Bateaux-Mouches," but many little rowing-boats are dropping down stream to Meudon, St. Cloud, and Surènes, and among them is one containing Primrose and André.

They are passing the wooded slopes of Bas Meudon. She leans back in the stern, one hand on the tiller, the other idly dabbling in the water. The artist watches her, as he rows, thinking that she grows prettier every time they meet—and they have met many times since that showery evening when their compact was made and sealed.

"How you look at me!" says Primrose presently. "Do you like my toilette? Am I *chic*?"

"You are adorable."

She wears a fresh *batiste* costume—worthy of M. Worth, in its cunning simplicity—and a quaint little rough straw hat trimmed with spring flowers. She looks like the spirit of Spring herself, as the soft breeze kisses her cheeks to a wild-rose bloom, and ruffles the wavy hair on her forehead.

"Primrose, do you know what day this is?" he asks, resting on his oars a moment.

"Sunday."

"Yes, but the date? It is the first of May."

She starts, and bends lower over the boat side.

"Well," she rejoins, without looking at him; "*après*?"

"Have you forgotten what you promised? I have kept my part of the agreement faithfully, and now you will keep yours, *n'est-ce pas*?"

She looks down at the bright water, rippling through her fingers.

"Why cannot we go on as we are a little longer?"

His face flushes with vexation and disappointment; he bends to the oars again, and answers not a word. She raises her head.

"*Fi donc!*—how cross you look! What the better will you be for knowing my name? You have been happy enough these last three weeks, at least you have said so——"

"I am happy when we are together," he returns, letting the boat drift again, "but when you leave me you take the sunshine with you, and all sorts of doubts and fears come flapping about me like bats at twilight."

"Fears of what?"

"Of losing you, *mignonne*. My hold on you is so slight. Suppose you were not to come to our next meeting-place—what should I do? How should I find you, not even knowing your name? When I am alone that thought haunts me like a nightmare."

She looks into his face half incredulously.

"Do you—do you care for me so much?"

"So much? You will never know how much," he answers gravely.

She flushes and pales; for a moment her eyes have the troubled look he has seen in them once before. Then with a quick movement of the head, as if dismissing an unwelcome thought, she says:

"If you are alone so much, of course you get all sorts of gloomy thoughts. Why don't you go out in the evening to the theatre? You said you were so fond of it——"

"Of late I have not cared for it: I have been living like a hermit-crab. Leroy asked me to go with him this evening to the Châtelet, but——. By-the-by, he gave me an order; where is it? Ah—*voilà!* They are playing 'La Reine Papillonette,' a fairy-piece, written for this wonderful *danseuse* that all Paris is talking about—Mademoiselle Fernande."

"What does all Paris say about her?" Primrose asks, catching at a drifting water-weed.

"That she dances like a sylph, and looks like an angel—a fallen angel, *bien entendu*."

"Is she a bad woman, then?"

"She is, I suppose, what most of her class are, neither better nor worse. I have not seen her, but——"

"Give me that order," the girl interrupts, in her pretty imperious way; "you shall not see her. 'Fallen angels' are dangerous."

He laughs as he gives her the paper.

"*Soyez tranquille*; a woman of the Fernande class would have no attraction for me, if she were as beautiful as Helen."

She lets fall the trailing water-weed, and watches it as it drifts away.

"But Mademoiselle Fernande has nothing to do with what we were speaking of just now," he resumes. "You were going to tell me——"

She looks up suddenly.

"You shall know to-morrow, I promise. But don't tease me now. I want to have a happy day; a perfect day; something to look back upon when—when spring and summer are past, and winter is come."

"So be it," he acquiesces, "we will have a holiday to remember all our lives. Steer straight, little one!"

The sweet May-day is in its golden prime when they reach their destination at St. Cloud. The park is looking its loveliest. The wide chestnut avenues are in blossom, the bees are busy among the fragrant limes, the young grass is like the turf in Dante's Paradise, "the colour of emeralds newly broken," and all things are so bright and fresh, and full of hope and promise, that the mere sight of them makes it happiness to be alive.

Primrose has shaken off her thoughtful mood, her face is as unclouded as the day. She is rippling over with childish gaiety, delighted with everything, wondering, exclaiming, breaking into little sudden trills of song.

"Un jour de Mai
Ça me prends une envie,
D'planter un Mai
À la porte de ma mie"

she sings, when they are sitting to rest in the chestnut plantation, within hearing of the cascades.

She has a lapful of wild flowers which she is arranging, sprays of fragrant hawthorn, buttercups and daisies, frail wood anemones, and a few half-opened rosebuds.

André lies at her feet, with his head on her knee, looking up, with the eyes of an artist and a lover, at the sweet young face above him, which is sweeter, softer, fairer at this moment, than he has ever seen it before.

"Primrose, how beautiful you are!" he says, when she is silent.

"And you too," she answers seriously, as she fastens a rose in his coat.

"Why do you laugh? It is true. With your dark eyes, and your dark curls, and your white teeth that you are showing now—*méchant!* you are beautiful and—and I love you."

.. The last four words in a hurried whisper, with a look that sets his pulses throbbing.

He puts up his arms, and draws her head down, and she kisses him on the lips for the first time.

"Are you happy?" she asks him, after a silence, with her cheek pressed against his.

"Almost too happy," he whispers back. And it is true, for at the moment his heart swells with that vague sadness which is the shadow of a great joy.

"Do you think you are—the worse for having known me?" she questions, still with her cheek against his.

"The worse? If we were never to meet again after to-day, I should be a better man all my life for having known and loved you, dear child."

"That is well. I am glad," she says, very earnestly.

"Primrose, is that a tear upon your cheek?"

"No, a dew-drop," she answers with a quick laugh, brushing it away.

* * * * *

The golden day is over, and they are floating homewards down the darkening river.

The evening is grey, chill, silent, almost to mournfulness. The sunset fire is all burnt away, save for one long luminous streak low down in the west. Dusky veils of shade descend over the landscape from the purple-grey sky, where the crescent moon is rising. Now and then a light breeze ruffles the river and whispers through the poplars, which stand like phantoms in the twilight. The lowing of cattle in the misty meadows by the water-side falls plaintively on the ear.

Primrose is very silent. Her brightness and gaiety seem to have faded with the fading light. She sits motionless, gazing straight before her, with that overcast look on her face which alters it so strangely.

"*Ma toute-belle*, speak to me," her companion says at length. "Sitting silent there in your white wrapper, you look like your own ghost. Is it really you?"

"Yes, it is I," she answers, but to his fancy her voice sounds distant and forlorn, as if it were indeed a ghost that spoke.

A curious dream-like feeling steals over him, as if they were drifting, she and he, out into the shadows of some unknown future.

He is almost glad when the journey is over, and the lights of Paris gleam through the dust.

They are approaching the first of the gas-lit bridges which span the river like fiery necklaces, when Primrose leans forward and asks: "What shall you do this evening when you leave me?"

"Go home and think of you."

"No, you must not do that, you will be *triste*. You can go to the Châtelet, here is the order."

"Not to-night; not after this sweet day."

"Yes, you must go. I have been thinking, and—and it will be best for you. Take it; to please me!"

She is so urgent that he reluctantly complies.

"*Bon Dieu*, how cold your hand is!" he exclaims as their fingers meet.

"Yes, I am cold, and tired," she answers wearily; "but it has been pleasant, has it not?"

"It has been, what you said it should be—perfect."

"Yes. Whatever to-morrow may bring forth it cannot rob us of the hours that are past. We have had our happy day."

She does not speak again till they are standing on the quay.

"We will take a carriage at the next stand, and I will put you down in the Place du Châtelet, and drive on home."

A few minutes later they are driving through the brilliant streets.

"To-morrow, *ma chère*," André says, "I shall wait for you in the Luxembourg Gardens, at the place where we first met. And then you will tell me who 'Primrose' is?"

"Yes, I promised you should know to-morrow."

She stops the *fiacre* before they reach the Place du Châtelet, in a quiet side-street where there are few passers.

When he has said good night she calls him back. He puts his foot on the step and bends towards her. She says not a word, but takes his head between her hands and kisses him passionately, again and again, on lips and eyes and forehead, then leans back suddenly and the *fiacre* drives on.

It is late when he reaches the theatre, but people are still thronging in at the doors, for Mademoiselle Fernande's name, which stares from the *affiches* in red letters a foot long, is a potent attraction to a certain class of play-goers.

When he enters, the farce which serves as a *lever du rideau* is just over, and the band is playing a *pot-pourri* of popular airs during the entr'acte.

He takes the seat which the *ouvreuse* indicates, a *fauteuil d'orchestre* in the second row from the stage, and looks round confusedly, bewildered by the sudden change of scene.

His eyes are dazzled by the glare of gas, the close hot atmosphere of the theatre stifles him, after breathing all day the sweet pure country air. Through all the blatant noise of the band he hears the ripple of the water round the boat, the whisper of the wind through the trees.

He looks resolutely at the drop-scene, but the Corinthian temple and palm-trees and impossibly blue mountains fade like a dissolving-view, and give place to a sweet vision framed in green leaves of a tender exquisite face with the bloom of a wild rose upon it.

"De Perny is not at his post to-night, apparently," says a voice near him. His right-hand neighbour is speaking to a friend on the seat behind.

"Pardon, he is here as usual, in the *loges de côté*; the second on the left." André mechanically glances towards the Marquis de Perny's box, and catches a glimpse of the sallow, *blasé*, cynical face of a man of forty, who looks ten years older.

"He is wonderfully constant—for him," remarks the first speaker.

"He is infatuated, simply that. And she cares about as much for him as for last night's bouquets. I could tell you something——"

The rest of the sentence is whispered into the ear of his companion, who stares, then laughs.

"*La drôlesse!* But are you sure it was she? In the dusk, you——"

"As sure as I am that you are you, *mon cher*. I recognised her at once, and, what is more, I saw that she recognised me."

"And the man, what like was he?"

"Some poor devil. Student, clerk, employé, *que sais-je?* One returns to one's first love, you see; at heart the girl is a *grisette* still, and perhaps——. Chut! they are beginning."

The curtain rises on the first scene of '*La Reine Papillonette*.'

Listlessly enough André watches the movements on the stage, which is crowded with gay and varied groups, until a sudden break in the music and expectant stir among the audience announce that "*la Fernande*" is about to make her entrance on the scene.

There is a moment's pause, then the band strikes up a dainty tripping measure, and—greeted with a burst of applause that makes the theatre ring—"Queen Butterfly" flutters on to the stage.

Again and again the applause rings out, and every *lorgnette* is directed towards the *danseuse*; but André, after one glance, averts his eyes with a shudder, for this dancer, with false colour on her cheeks and lips, and jewels on her bare white bosom, is like a horrible travesty of—Primrose.

In spite of himself he looks at her again, and now his heart begins to throb with a nameless dread, and he turns suddenly cold, as if an icy hand had clutched him.

As she approaches the footlights, he sees her eyes travel from face to face along the second row of seats till they come to his—and pause.

Then, with a shock that he feels through all his frame, he recognises her. It is Primrose.

Light as thistle-down she flutters forward, her arms, to which gauzy wings are attached, outspread, her little feet seeming scarcely to touch the boards. The dancer's conventional smile is on her lips, but her eyes, which are fixed upon her lover's, have the look of a soul

in pain. In all the crowded theatre she sees only him, as he sees only her.

Mechanically, as it seems, she comes on, her eyes riveted to his face, till she is close to the footlights—recklessly close, so that there is a murmur of apprehension among the audience, and several voices shout to her to keep back.

In the same moment the murmur rises to a cry of horror, as a glare of light and a sheet of flame leap up suddenly round the airy figure. Uttering shriek upon shriek she rushes up the boards.

How he reaches it André never afterwards knows, but before any one else can approach her he is on the stage, he has seized her in his arms, and is wildly trying to beat down the flames with his bare hands. A baize covering is thrown to him, he wraps her in it and throws her down, and holds her down in spite of her frantic struggles, till the flames are extinguished.

Then he lifts her—poor scorched butterfly—and carries her to her dressing-room.

A doctor is already there, and the room is crowded with horror-stricken and compassionate faces. The Marquis de Perny's is not among them. It is a painful scene, and the Marquis avoids painful scenes on principle.

Primrose is conscious. Her eyes are wide open, and very bright, but there is a bluish pallor on her face, and her features are drawn and pinched.

The doctor gently lifts the wrapper. The flames have spared her face, her feet, and one hand and arm. The rest——

After one glance he replaces the covering.

"I will give her an anæsthetic." That is all he says.

She has watched his face with her bright anxious eyes, and reads her sentence of death upon it.

She puts out her unwounded hand to her lover, who kneels at her side, miserably watching her.

"I have kept my word," she says with a forlorn smile; "you know now who 'Primrose' is. Come closer. There is something I want to say——"

"Not now, not now," he falters.

"When, if not now?" she asks significantly. "*Mon ami*," she whispers, "it was all true that—I told you—the first time we met. The woman who took me from my mother was a dancer. When I left her I—was quite alone."

A faint flush creeps to her white cheek.

"Yet was I only happy when I could get away for an hour or two in my old poor dress, like I did—that day—raise my head!"

She draws a few labouring breaths and goes on: "I ought never

to have met you again, but it was like breathing pure air to be with you, and when I learned to love you——”

A spasm of pain interrupts her; she shudders in his arms. He turns fiercely on the doctor.

“Give her something; do something,” he says hoarsely.

But when the surgeon approaches she turns her head resolutely away.

“No, no,” she repeats, with the ghost of her old wilful manner; “I will not be stupefied. André——”

He has to bend close now, to catch the words.

“Dear, I want you to say, if you can, ‘I forgive you.’ Just those words.”

Out of the depths of his breaking heart he says them, while his tears fall on her face like rain.

“Primrose—for God’s sake—do not leave me! Live for me, oh, live for me!”

She shakes her head with a piteously tender smile.

“I would not if I could, dearest; it is better—better as it is.”

She puts up her hand and strokes his face.

“Don’t grieve; forget me. Yet not—quite. Think of me—sometimes—in spring—when the primroses are growing—on—my——”

Her voice dies away in an inarticulate murmur, but her hand still seeks his; and her eyes dwell upon his face till the film of death gathers over them.

